

# Working Lands for Wildlife Initiative

Conservation Beyond Boundaries **WLFW**



## Overview

Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) is designed to maintain profitable food and fiber production on private lands while also benefitting habitat for important wildlife populations. Private lands are essential for providing habitat for nearly two-thirds of all species listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

WLFW uses a voluntary, innovative approach with farmers, ranchers and forest managers to benefit high-priority habitat for seven species of wildlife that are declining, candidates for listing or listed under the ESA. Through WLFW, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) works with producers to create and improve wildlife habitat with regulatory predictability from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

WLFW gives peace of mind to participants that as long as they maintain the conservation practices and systems that benefit the targeted species, they can continue their farming, ranching and forest operations and remain compliant with the ESA regulatory responsibilities for up to 30 years.

Through WLFW, landowners and managers can receive technical and financial assistance to voluntarily restore and improve habitat on their land for the seven species included in the initiative: greater sage-grouse,

lesser prairie-chicken, gopher tortoise, bog turtle, New England cottontail, golden-winged warbler and Southwestern willow flycatcher.

## Priorities

Seven species were identified during a collaborative process with partners for WLFW. The species were selected using several criteria including: conservation on private lands can help reverse species' decline; needs of the selected species are compatible with management of agricultural land; opportunities for partnership; ESA tools are in place to provide regulatory certainty; and habitat improvements benefit other species.

## Funding Source

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

## Results

In fiscal year 2014, NRCS invested \$28 million to help producers protect and restore wildlife habitat on 729,000 acres in priority areas of the seven species.

NRCS requested further consultation with USFWS on the existing biological opinion to obtain additional coverage for NRCS conservation practices and 65 other species that overlap with the Southwestern willow flycatcher. The new biological opinion will enhance conservation delivery throughout riparian areas in the desert Southwest.



*The lesser prairie chicken is one of seven priority species of Working Lands for Wildlife.*

## Feature Story

## Private Landowners Use Ecosystem Approach to Help Endangered Southwest Bird

The Southwestern willow flycatcher is a small migratory bird that lives along rivers and streams in the Southwest. The Southwestern willow flycatcher is an endangered species, suffering from a decrease in the riparian habitat the bird calls home.

Water diversion, groundwater pumping, unmanaged grazing and invasive plants have diminished the riparian habitat. The bird relies on surface water and moist soils from May through July for raising young. As part of ongoing efforts to recover the bird, NRCS has worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to expand conservation work throughout riparian zones in the

arid Southwest, including Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada and Utah.

NRCS and FWS have developed a habitat evaluation guide that planners can use to identify existing and potential habitat for the species. The two agencies have also developed conservation systems that can be used to improve habitat for the flycatcher, as well as 83 other listed or candidate species, while also incorporating continued grazing and other agricultural production.

Through WLFW, NRCS works with private landowners to implement conservation practices that improve habitat for the Southwestern willow flycatcher while also boosting working lands operations. Since 2012, NRCS and private landowners have put conservation systems on nearly 7,000 acres.

For example, NRCS works with ranchers to install fences along riparian areas, keeping cattle from damaging critical habitat. NRCS also helps ranchers install cross-fencing, dividing large pastures into smaller ones. This system, called rotational grazing, provides better forage for livestock while also preventing pastures from being overgrazed and prone to erosion. Additionally, NRCS works with farmers to irrigate more efficiently, thus conserving water to ensure rivers and streams maintain water levels.

This ecosystem approach to the flycatcher's recovery also supports the recovery of more species, potentially restoring habitat for 83 other federally listed and candidate species. Meanwhile, this conservation work also helps clean and conserve water while leading to other public environmental benefits.



*The endangered Southwestern willow flycatcher nests in the riparian areas of the Southwest.*

Fiscal Year 2014 Working Lands for Wildlife Initiative  
NRCS Financial Assistance (FA) and Active and Completed Contracts

Species	Acres	NRCS Investment	Contracts
Bog Turtle	11	\$12,857	2
Gopher Tortoise	27,506	\$2,584,524	169
Golden Wing Warbler	2,226	\$1,313,137	47
Sage-Grouse	572,883	\$19,396,722	166
Lesser Prairie-Chicken	120,809	\$2,725,976	23
New England Cottontail	519	\$586,797	19
Southwest Willow Flycatcher	5,222	\$1,434,947	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>729,175</b>	<b>\$28,054,960</b>	<b>442</b>

Data source: NRCS Resource Economics, Analysis and Policy Division, January 2015.